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How Our Bodies Cope with Stress: Does Sexual Orientation Matter?

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Troubling stress and strains over time can inflict a hit on our health—and even shorten our lives. But there’s not an equal-opportunity risk: Racial and ethnic minorities show markedly worse biological signs of stress than do other adults. Stigma and prejudice are thought to be among key underlying causes of this difference.

So what about sexual minorities? Gay men, lesbians and those with a bisexual orientation also are likely to encounter discrimination. Do their bodies, too, carry worse biological signs of stress that threaten health and create a known risk for premature death?

Bisexual men showed significantly more “wear-and-tear” to their bodies than heterosexual or gay males in a large new study from the July/August issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, journal of the American Psychosomatic Society. Perhaps surprisingly, gay men actually showed a lower stress impact than straight men. However, women of all sexual orientations showed about the same signs of biological stress.

The researchers used information gathered from a government health study of 14,000 Americans 20 to 59 years old. They compared the level of allostatic load (AL) in people of varied sexual orientations. The AL score combines immune, cardiovascular and other measures that reveal the toll on our bodies from chronic stress and unhealthy behaviors. “It reflects how well the body does at getting us back into healthy balance when stress occurs, how much wear-and-tear our body takes as we deal with stress,” says senior study author Vickie Mays, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Health Policy and Management at UCLA. Her coauthors include colleagues Robert-Paul Juster, Ph.D. and Susan Cochran, Ph.D. A high AL strongly predicts many health problems and risk for early death.

There’s very little research on sexual orientation, gender and biological measures of how the body’s coping with stress, says Mays. One recent, much smaller Canadian study also found bisexual men at an apparently higher risk than other men.

This new evidence in *Psychosomatic Medicine* suggests the bodily “wear-and-tear” risks for all sexual minorities don’t parallel the clear-cut health risks faced by racial minorities, Mays points out.

Gay men in this study had leaner bodies than straight men, possibly due to diet and/or exercise, which may be health-promoting, and this could help explain their edge over heterosexual males. In surveys, gay males also are much more likely than bi men to report being “out” to people important to them, while bisexual males say they feel less connected to a community than do gay men, and they engage in more unhealthy behaviors as well. Bi men may feel not fully accepted by either the straight or gay male communities. All of these cultural factors could foster higher stress in bisexual men, the researchers speculate.

In some other studies, “bi men report more emotional distress than gay men, but bisexual women don’t feel more distressed than lesbians,” notes Mays. Our culture may deem it more acceptable for women to be fluid in their sexual behavior, she speculates, so reducing the feeling of stigma and the stress felt by bisexual women.

Earlier research on health and sexual minorities focused mostly on subjects in poor physical or mental health, says Mays. “Now we’re seeing people as they really are, out in the world, in these large population-based studies,” and the picture is more complex. It can’t be drawn in broad strokes. “We have to look at health issues based on both gender and sexual orientation,” she concludes.

Study Link:

https://journals.lww.com/psychosomaticmedicine/Fulltext/2018/07000/Chronic_Physiologic_Effects_of_Stress_Among.8.aspx

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